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Winsor

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[54] **STAMPED METAL FLOURESCENT LAMP AND METHOD FOR MAKING**

[75] Inventor: **Mark D. Winsor**, Olympia, Wash.

[73] Assignee: **Winsor Corporation**, Seattle, Wash.

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Related U.S. Application Data

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[51] **Int. Cl.**^{6} **H01J 9/24**; H01J 9/26

[52] **U.S. Cl.** **445/26**; 445/43; 445/44

[58] **Field of Search** 445/26, 25, 43, 445/44

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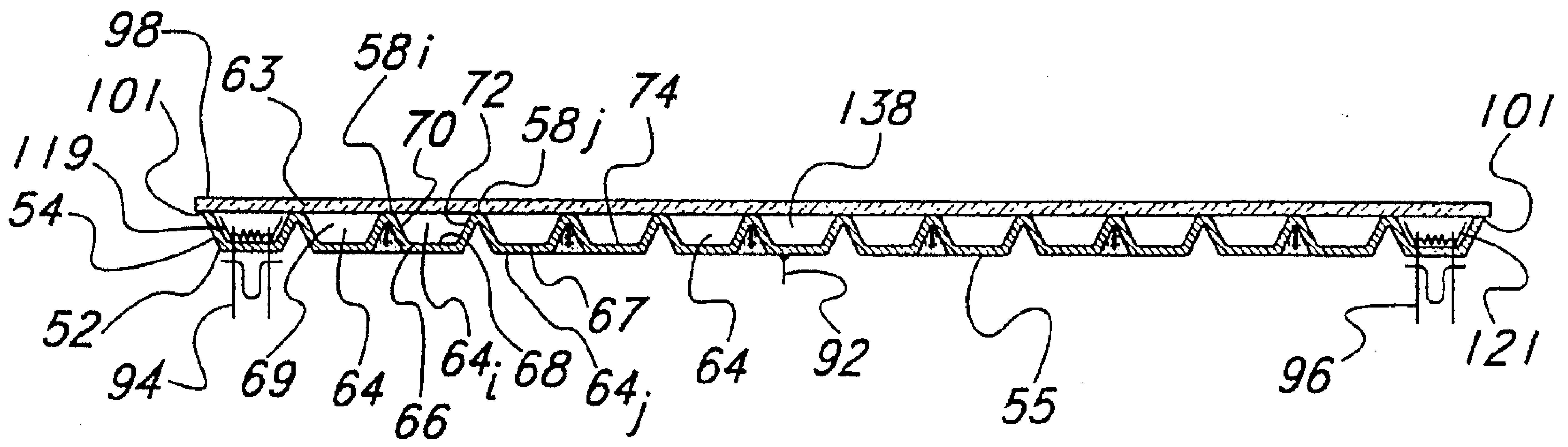
Primary Examiner—P. Austin Bradley
Assistant Examiner—Jeffrey T. Knapp
Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Seed and Berry

[57] **ABSTRACT**

A planar fluorescent lamp lamp includes a first transparent cover bonded atop a metal body with a serpentine channel therein. The lamp body is coated with an insulative coating and the glass solder bead bonds the cover to the lamp at its perimeter and along the ridges defining the serpentine channel. An alternative embodiment of the lamp includes a second transparent cover bonded above the first transparent cover enabling the fluorescent material to be contained in a second enclosure, isolated from the source of light energy. A second alternative embodiment conceals the electrodes of the lamp beneath the lamp body and provides plasma slots to allow the concealed electrodes to energize the lamp. Another alternative embodiment utilizes a conductive transparent coating on the lamp cover to allow the lamp cover to supplement the lamp body as a cold cathode.

19 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets



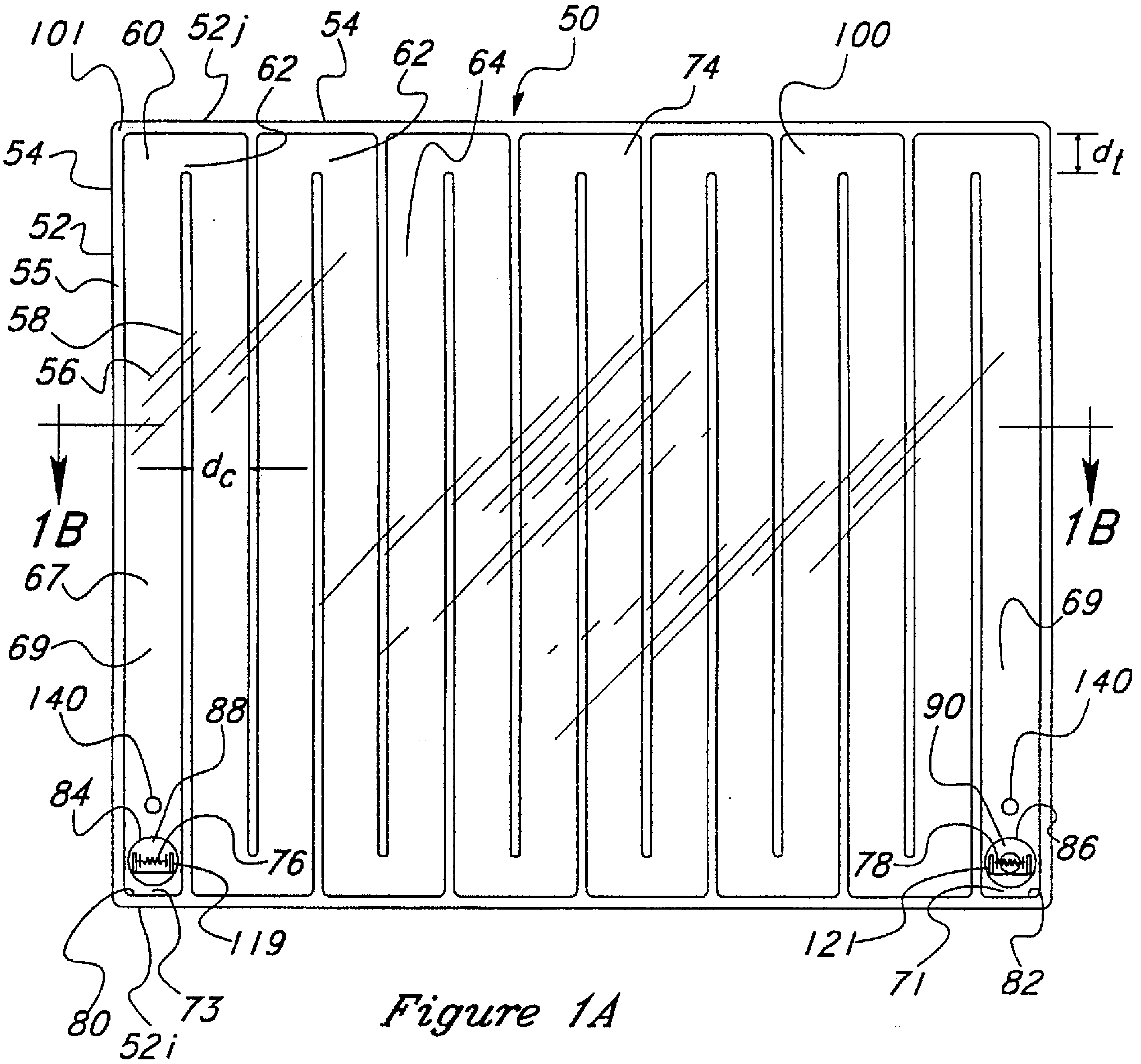


Figure 1A

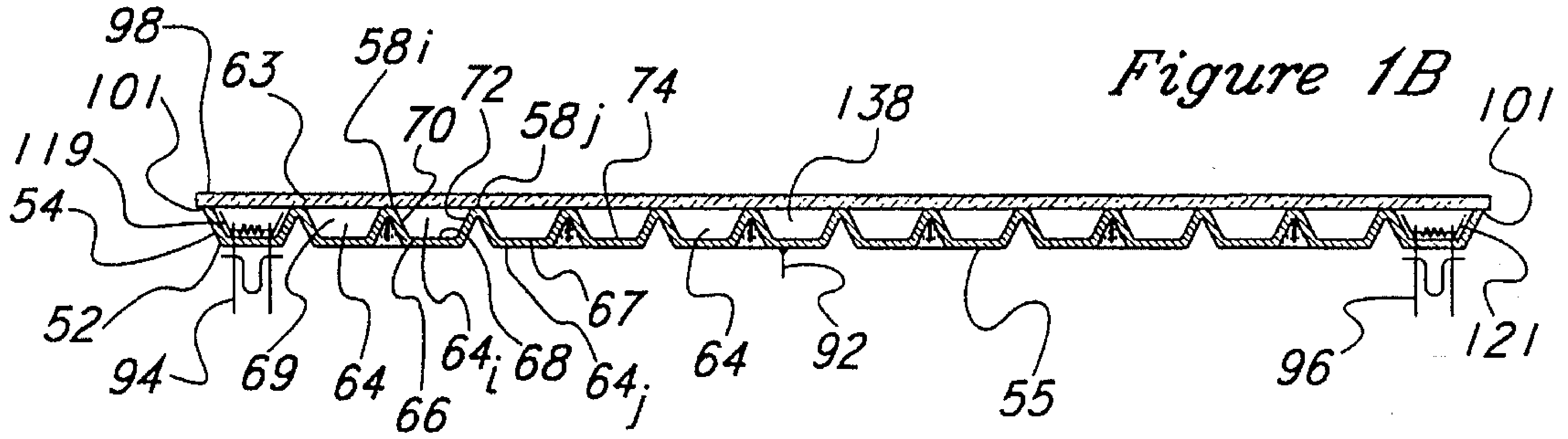


Figure 1B

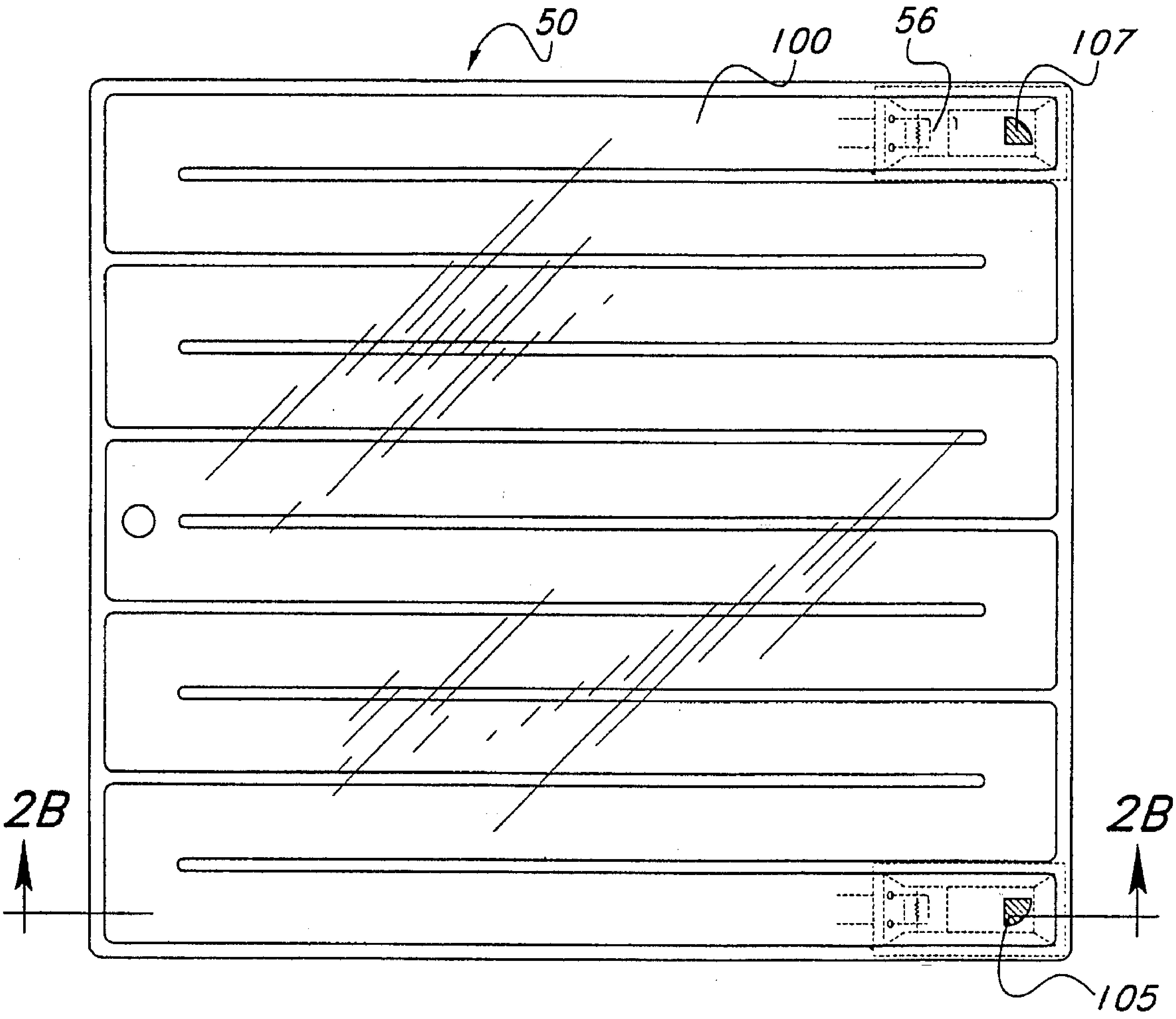


Figure 2A

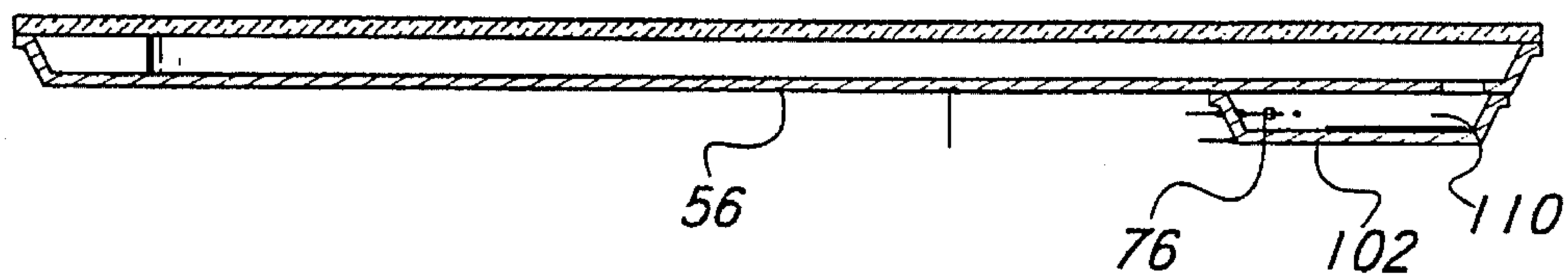


Figure 2B

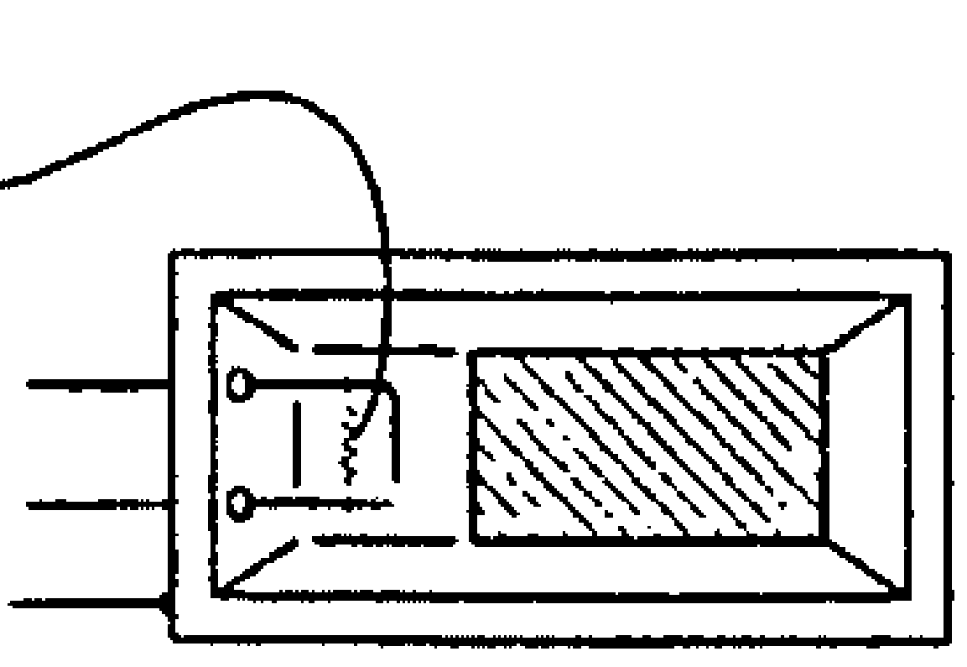


Figure 2C

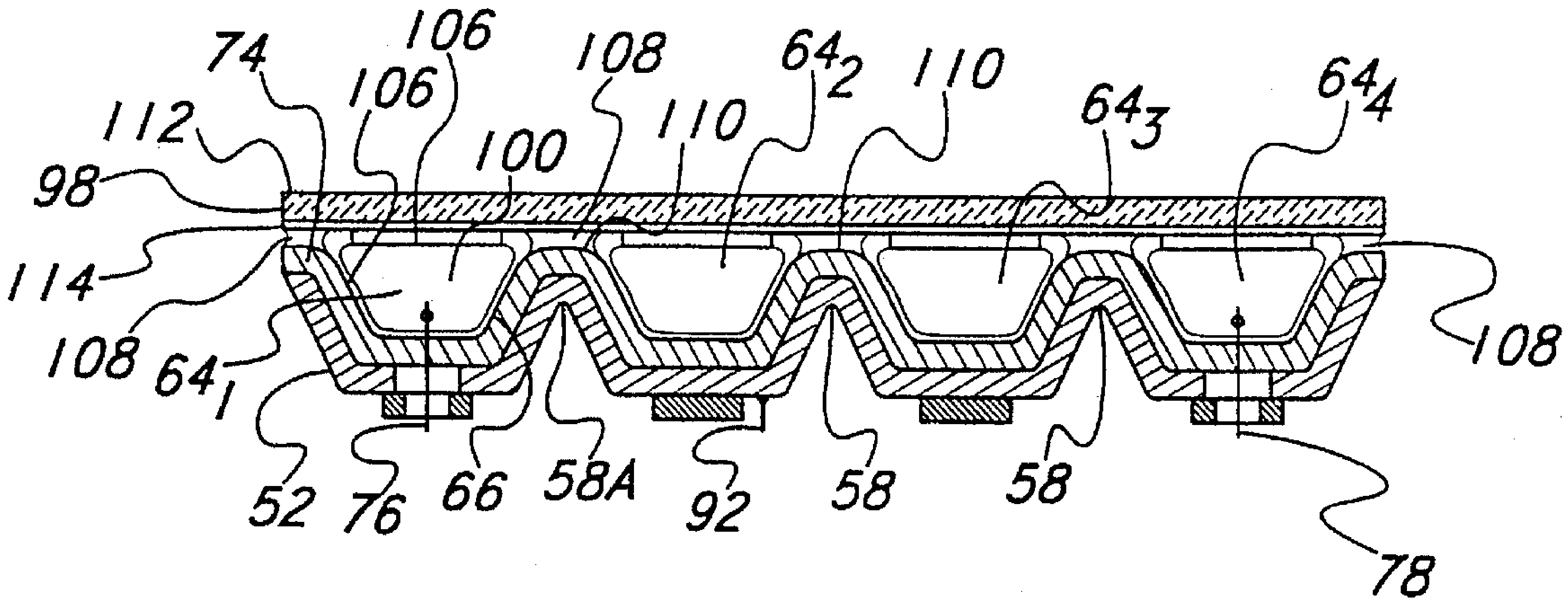


Figure 3

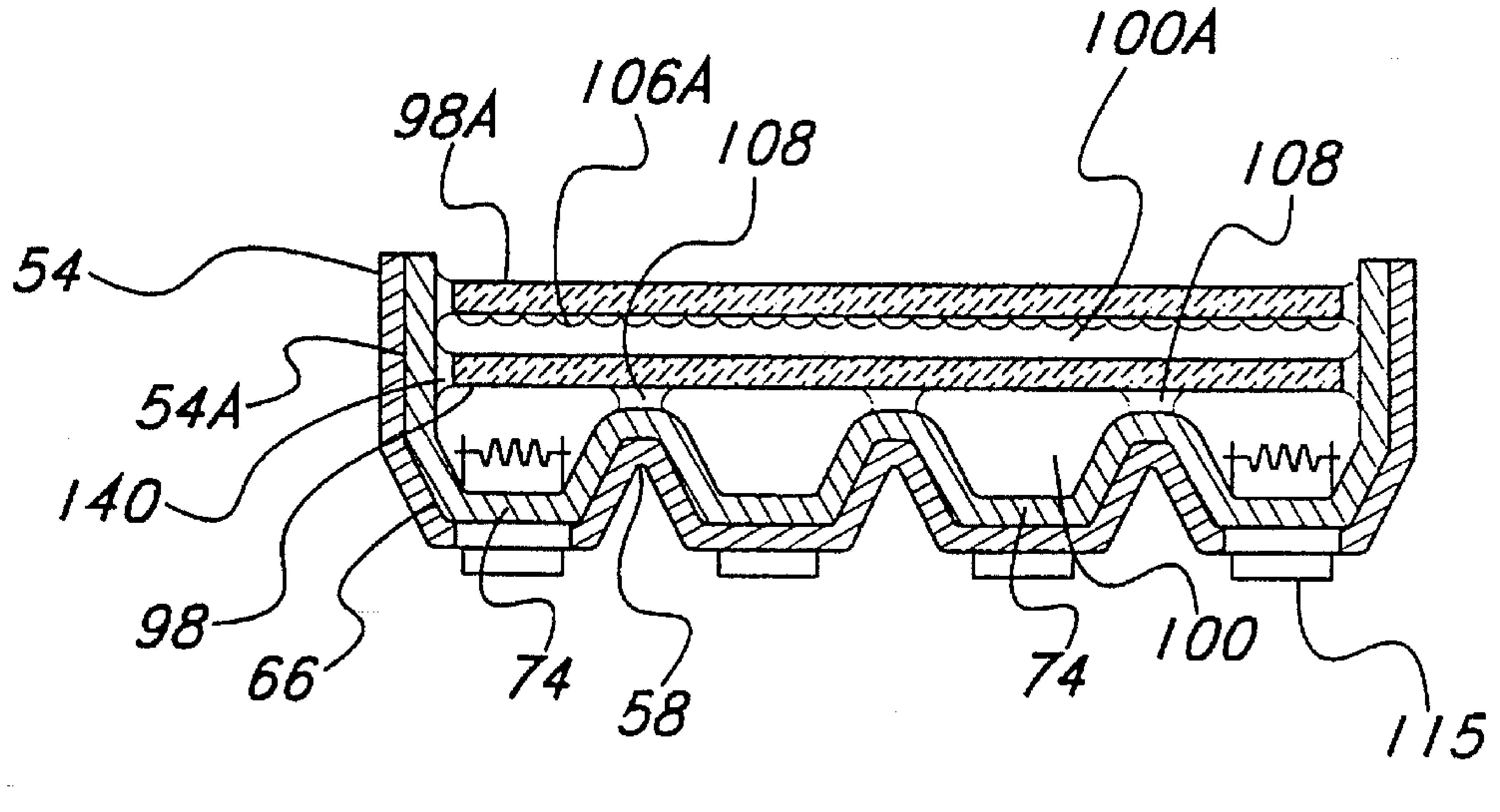


Figure 4

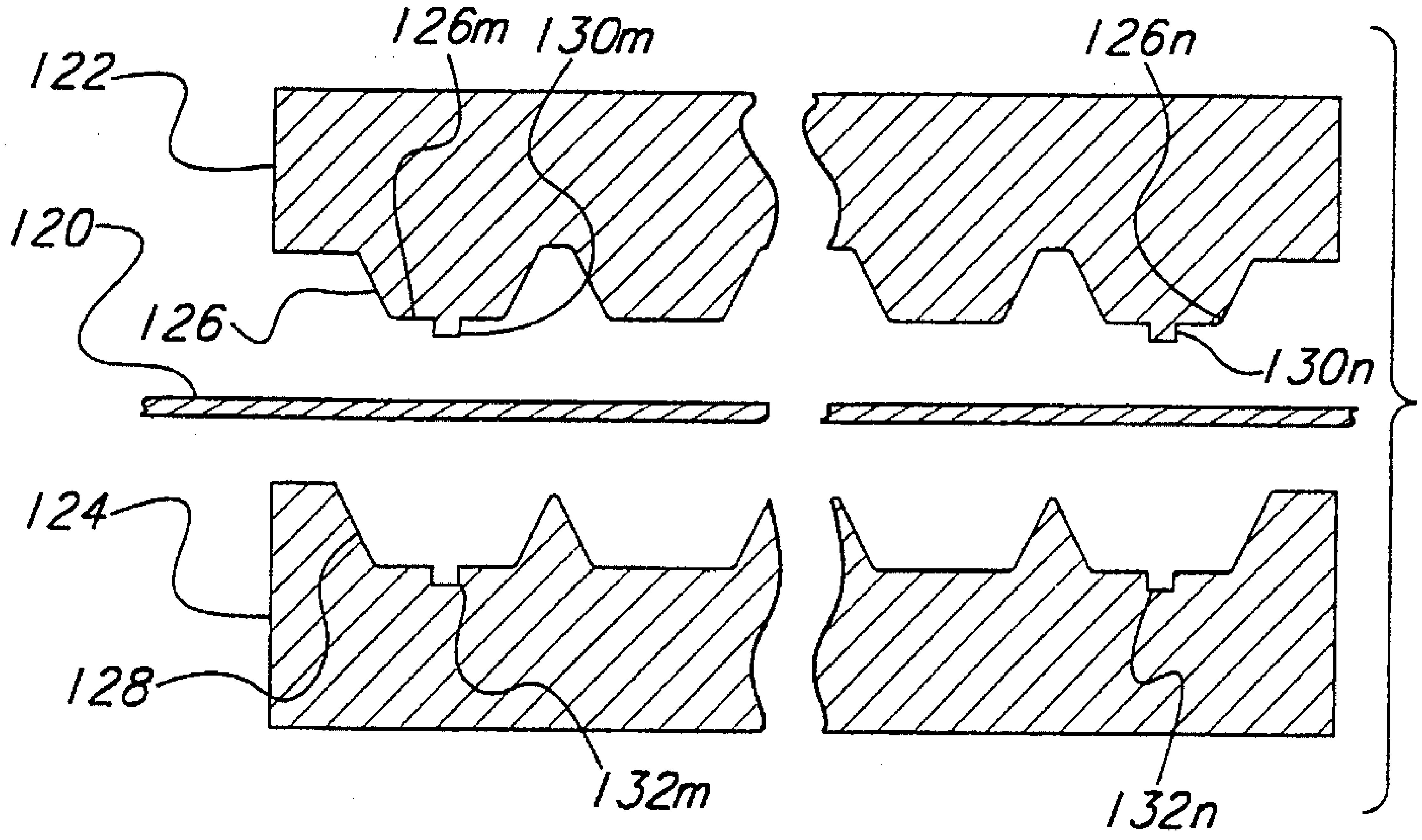


Fig. 5A

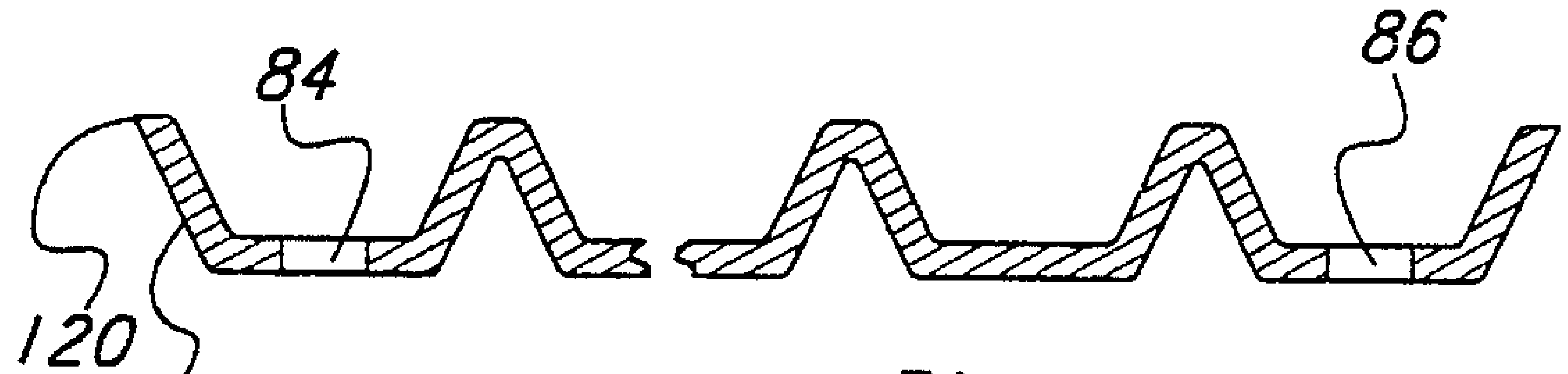


Fig. 5B

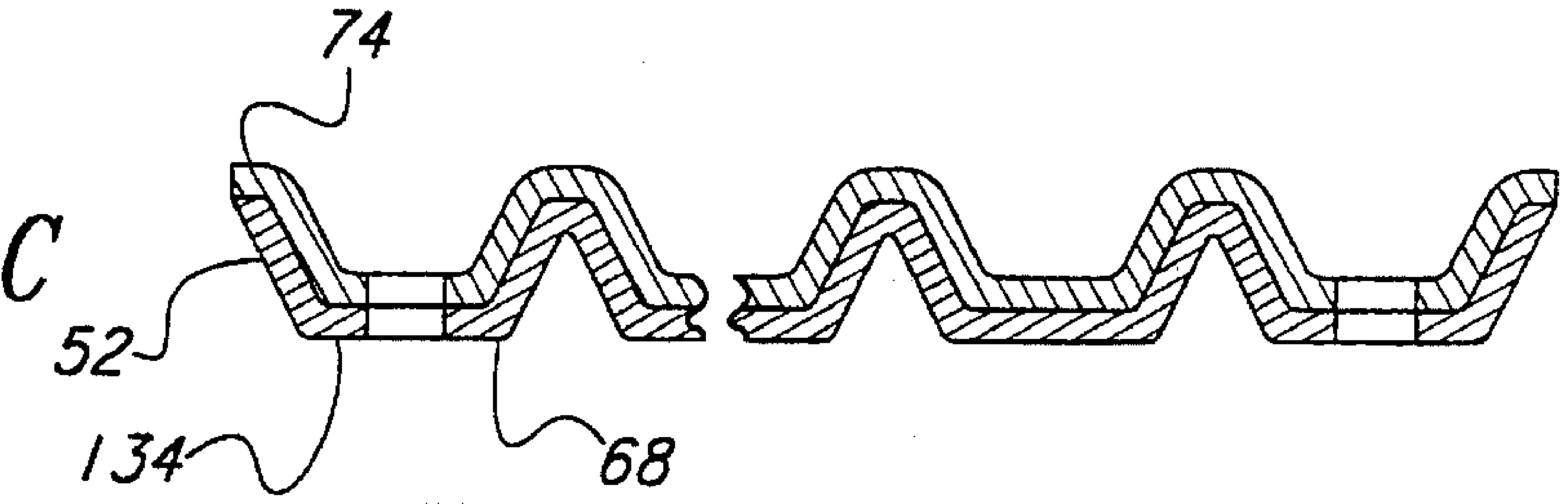


Fig. 5C

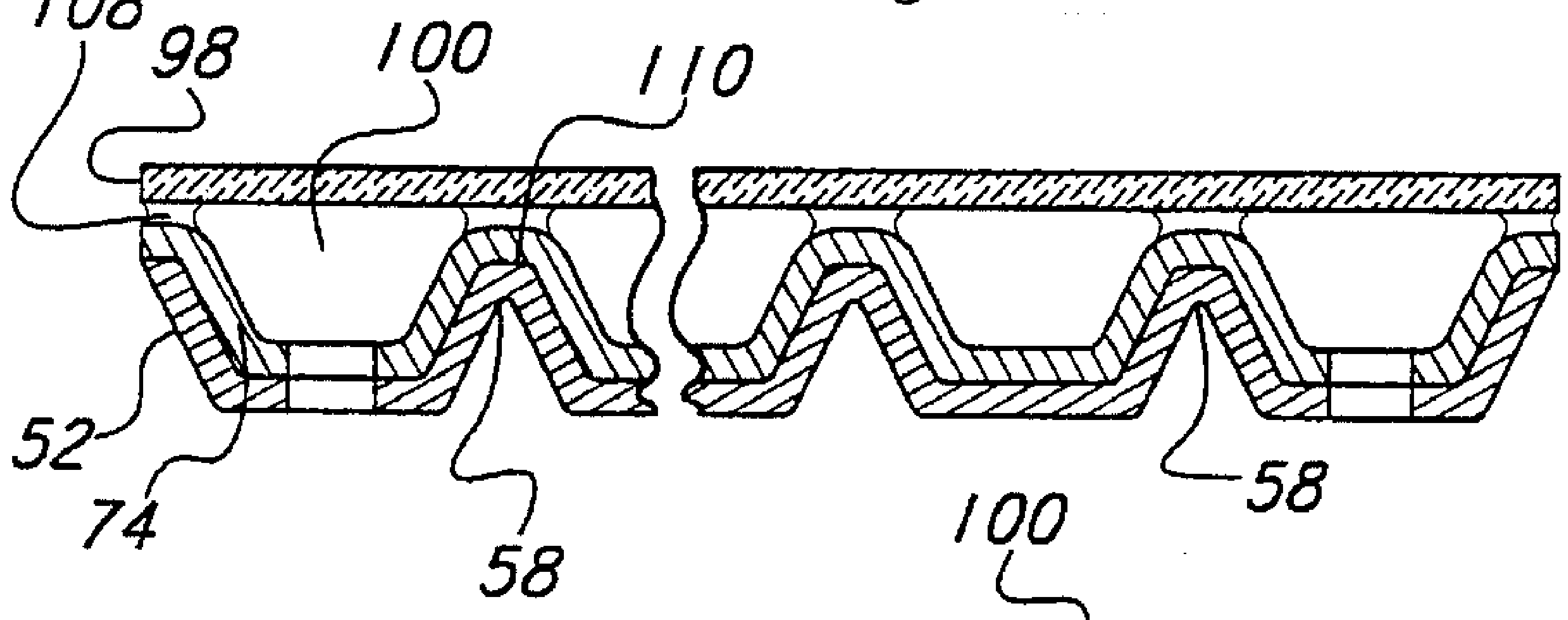


Fig. 5D

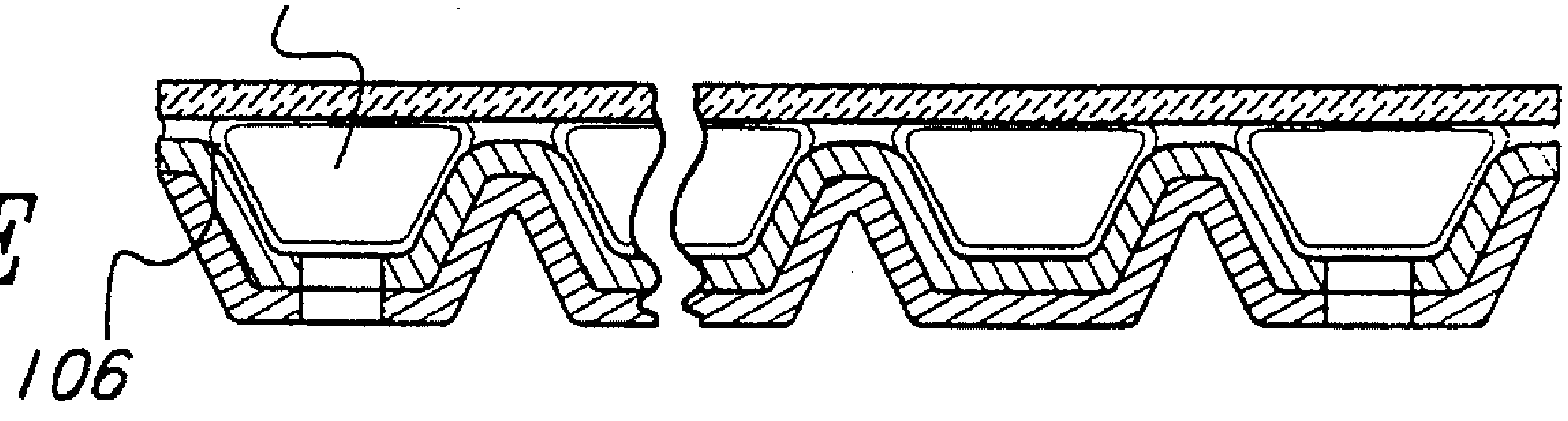


Fig. 5E

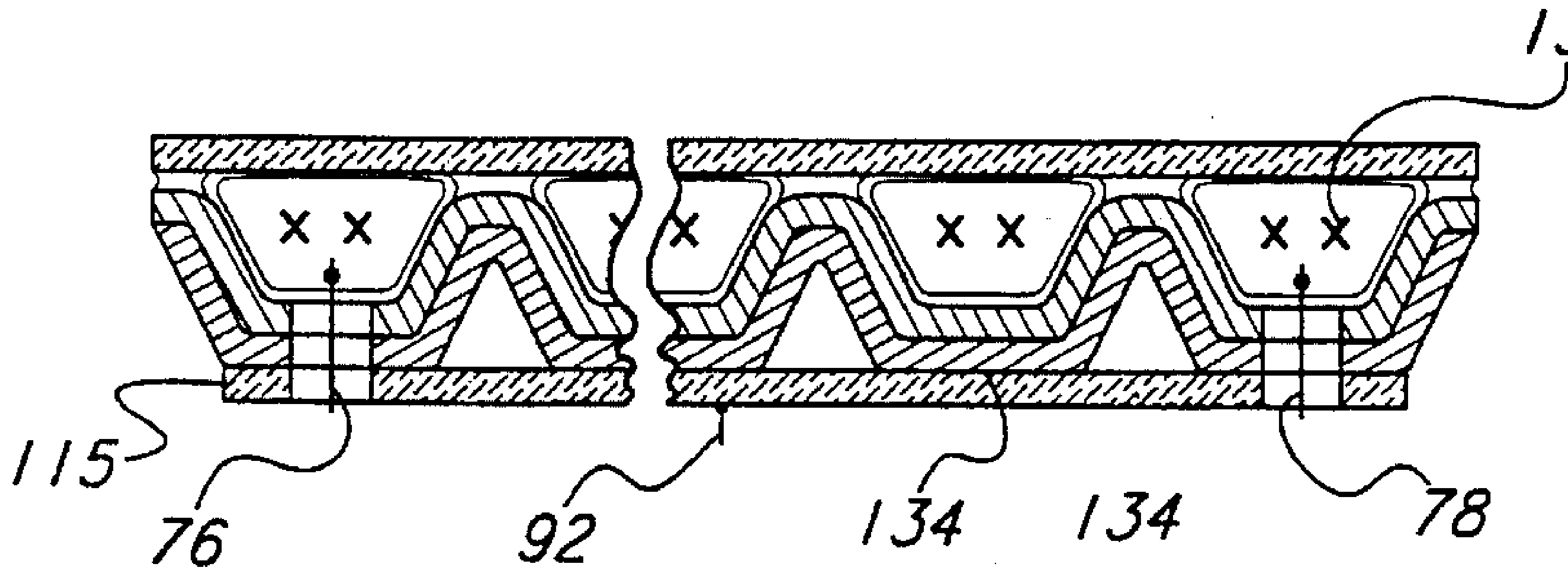


Fig. 5F

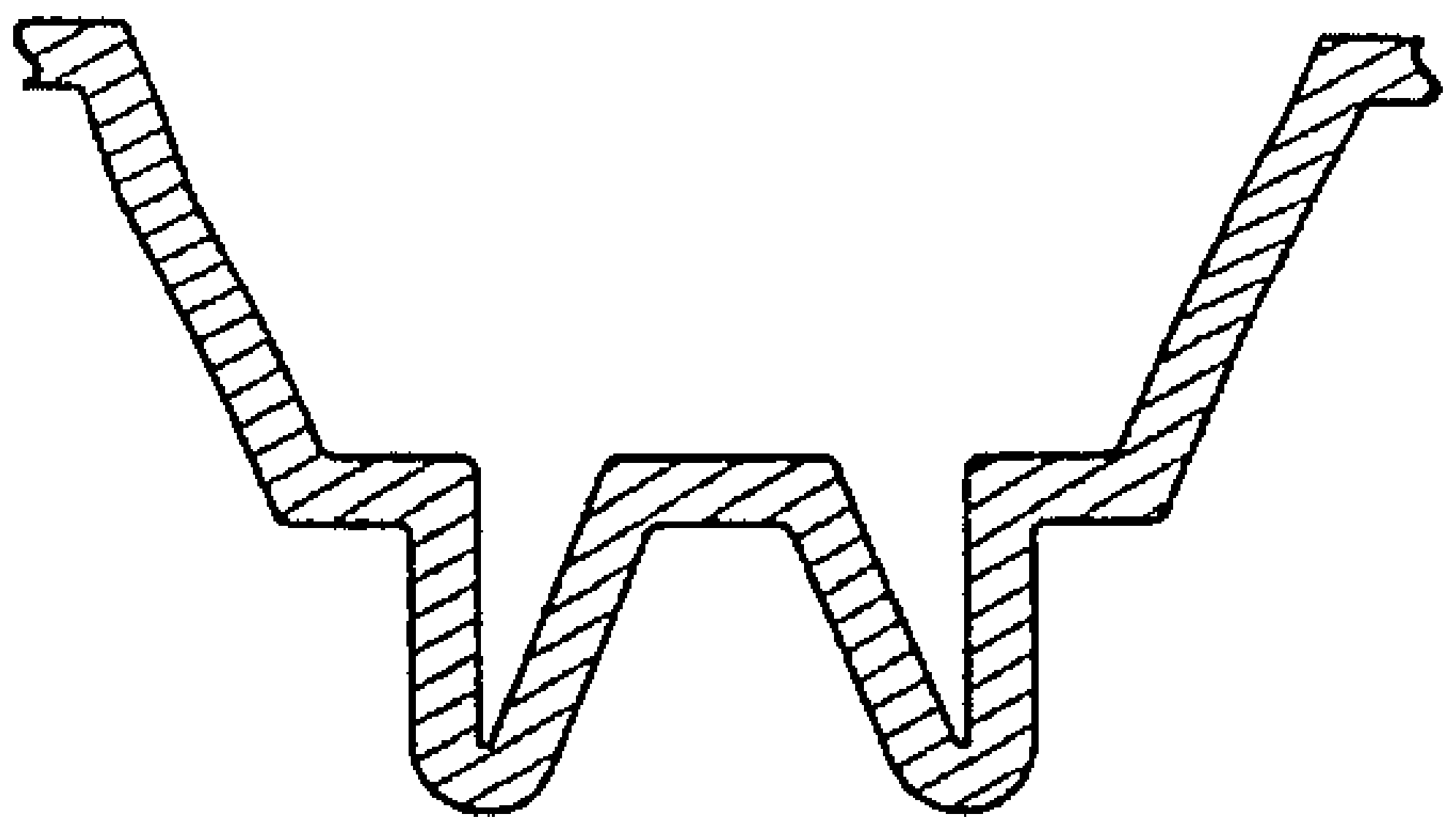


Figure 6A

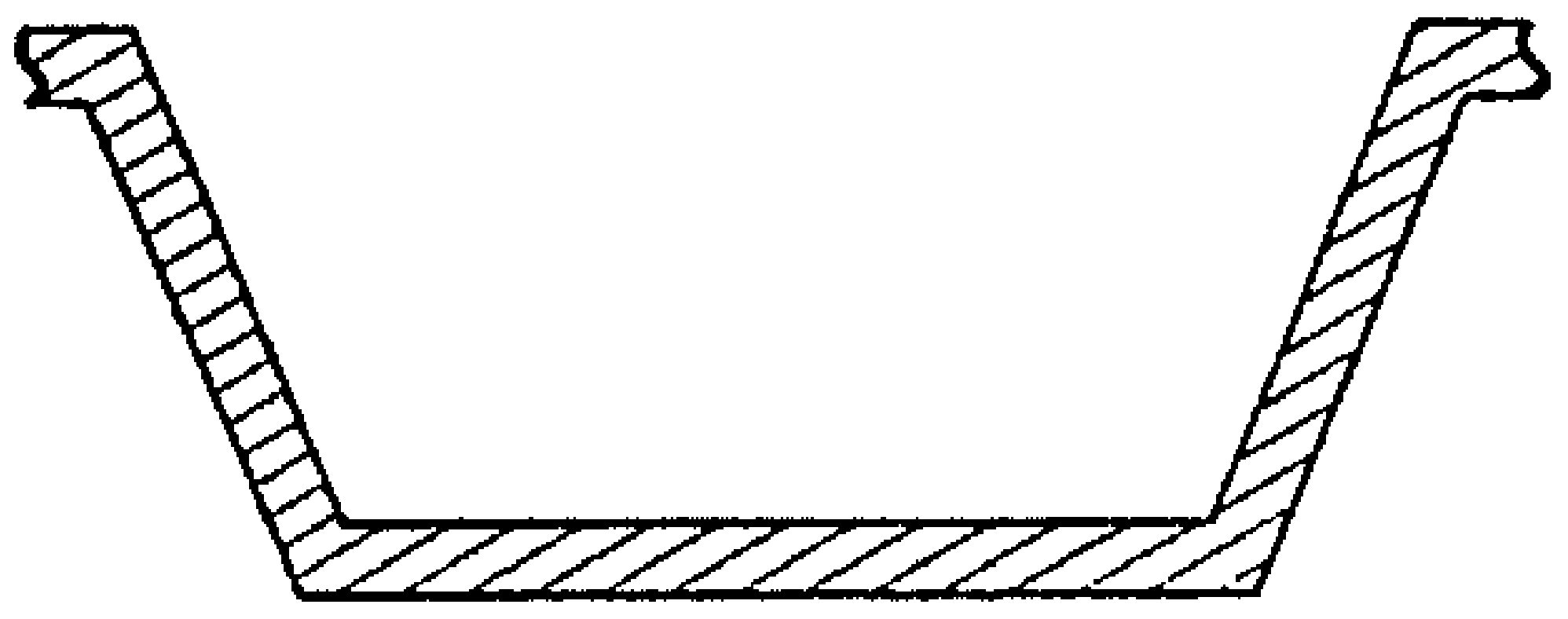


Figure 6B

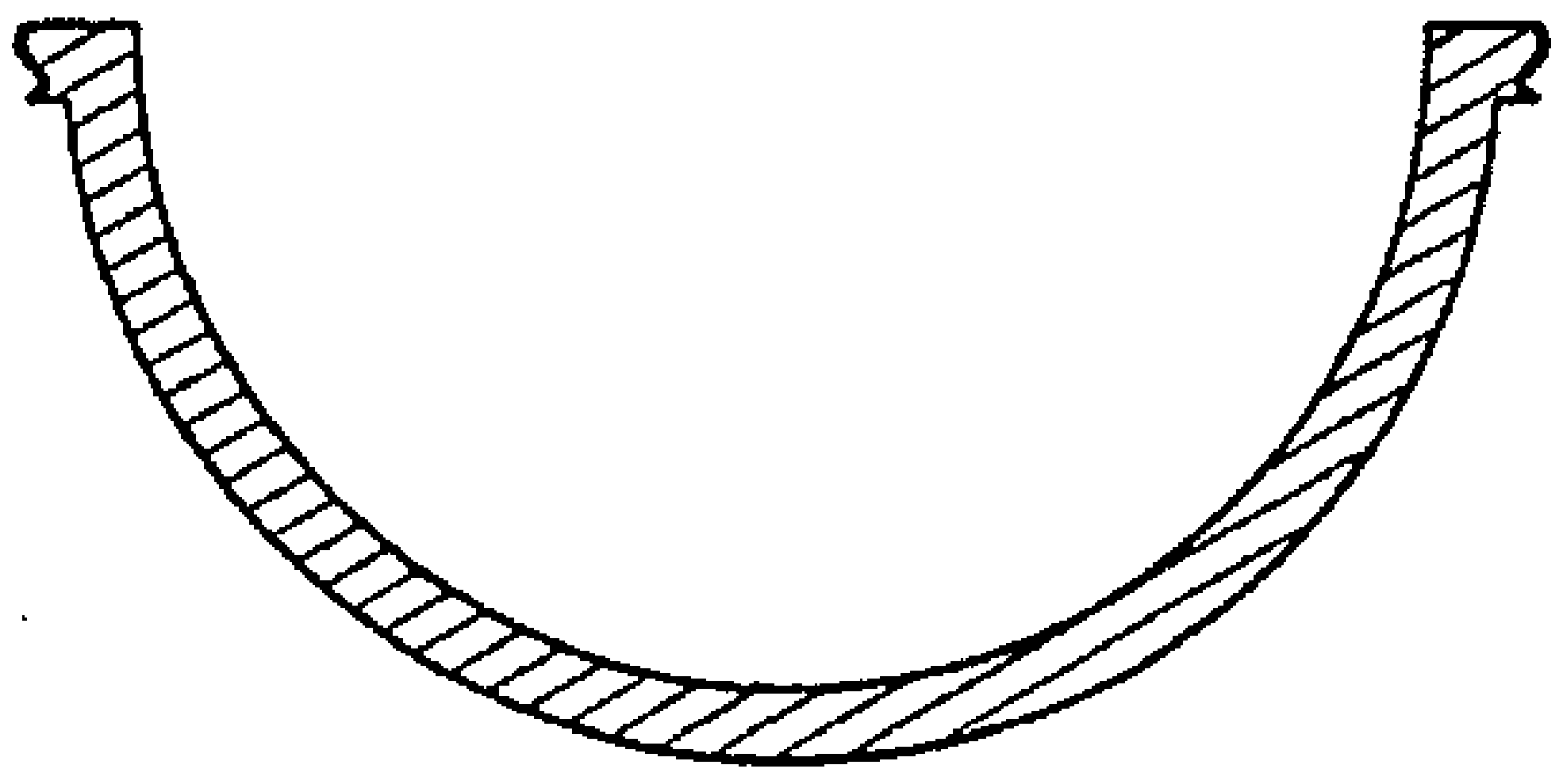


Figure 6C

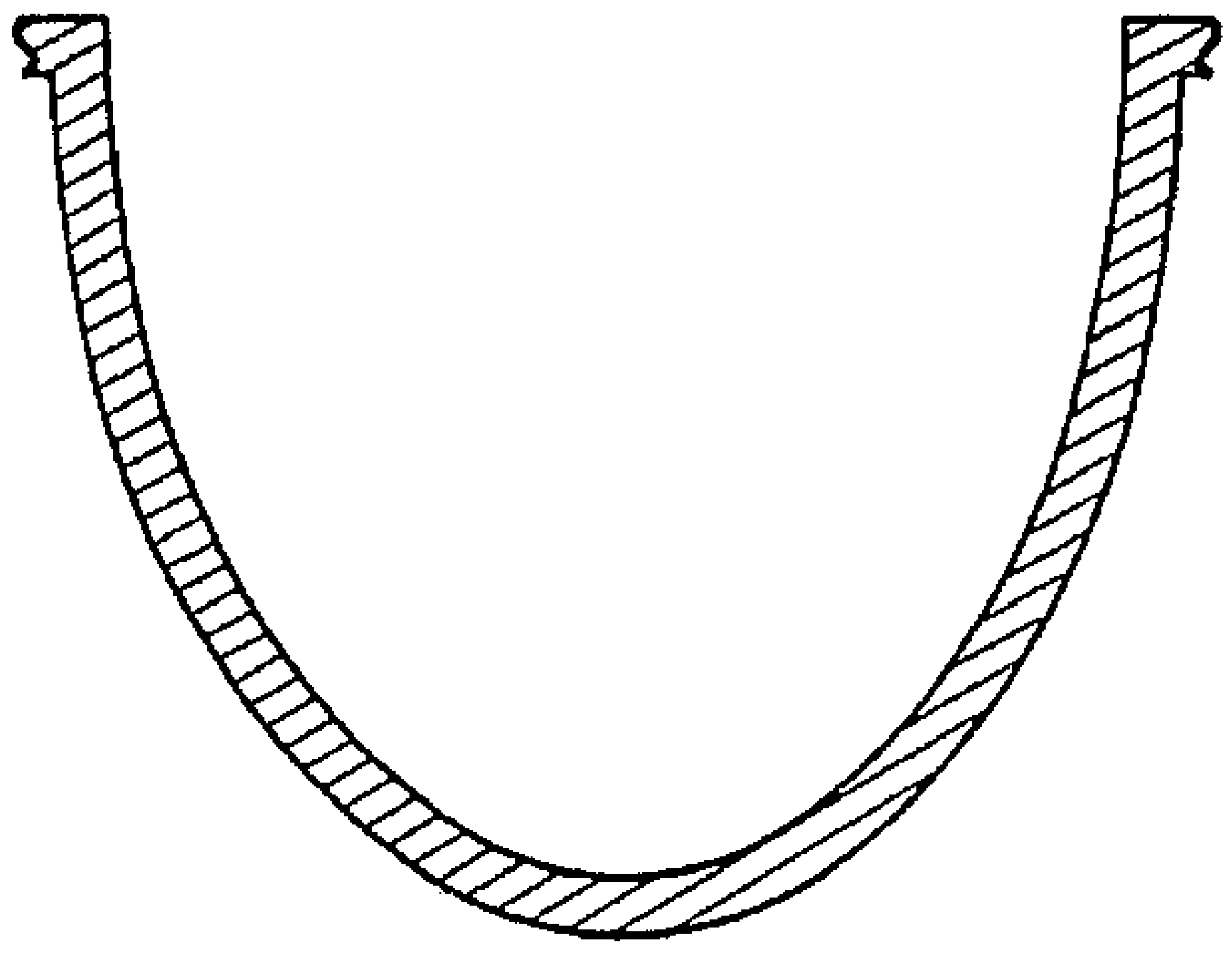


Figure 6D

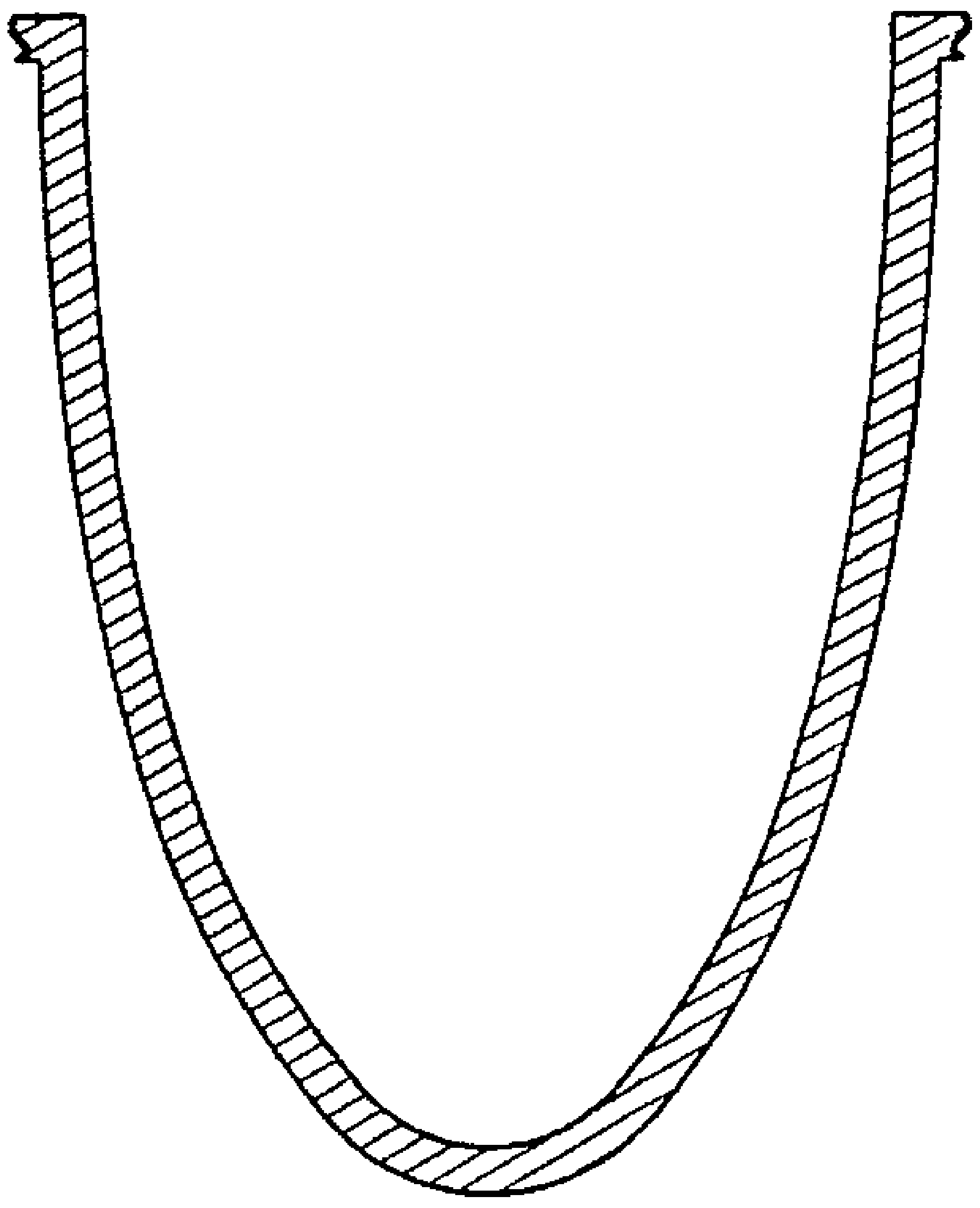


Figure 6E

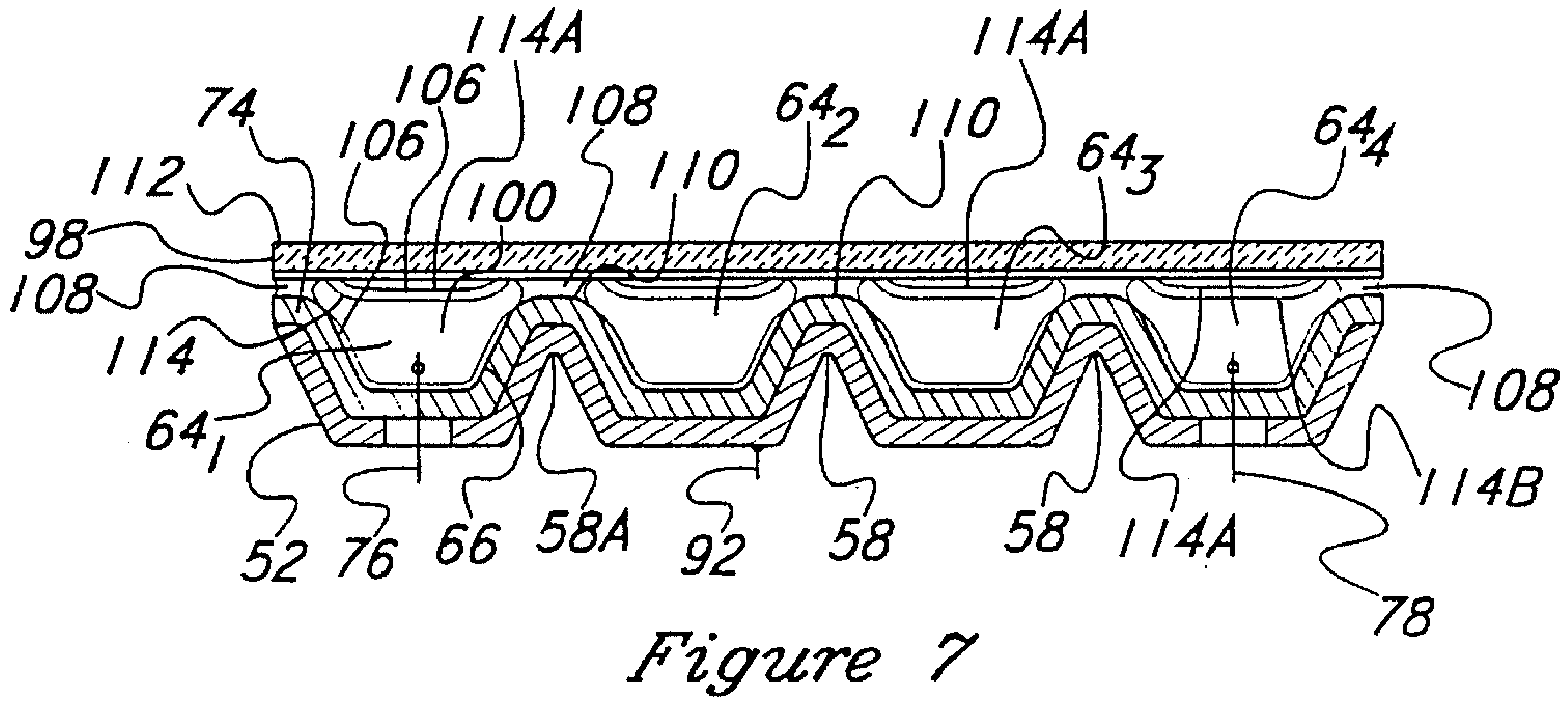


Figure 7

STAMPED METAL FLOURESCENT LAMP AND METHOD FOR MAKING

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application is a division of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/198,495, filed Feb. 18, 1994.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates to planar fluorescent lamps, particularly planar fluorescent lamps with metal lamp bodies and serpentine channels formed in the lamp body using metal stamping techniques.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Thin, planar, durable, easily manufacturable and relatively large area light sources having a range of light intensities are useful in many applications. Such light sources may be useful in backlights for LCDs to improve readability in all ambient lighting situations. They are also commonly used in night vision and avionics applications and, if filed (i.e., several lamps are positioned adjacently in a two-dimensional matrix), may be useful in sign applications to provide a uniform light source for illuminating a graphic image.

In some applications incandescent lights or LED arrays can be used to form planar light sources. However, these devices typically face the limitations of lack of uniformity of light, high power consumption, and generation of undesirable heat.

An alternative often chosen in modem applications is fluorescent technology. Tubular fluorescent lamps have the advantage of being relatively efficient, generating relatively bright light, and having well-established manufacturing capability. Tubular fluorescent lamps suffer, however, from their fragility, their requirement for optical elements to reflect and diffuse light to provide a uniform display, and limited capability to operate efficiently and effectively in low light applications.

A more desirable technology in many applications is the planar fluorescent lamp. Planar fluorescent lamps are known in the art, having been described, for example, in U.S. Pat. Nos. 3,508,103; 3,646,383; and 3,047,763. Typically, such lamps in the prior art are formed by molding a housing and a cover, each from a piece of glass and sealing the glass pieces to form a sealed enclosure. A selected gas and a fluorescent material are placed in the sealed enclosure for emitting light when an electrical field is applied.

Where the enclosure is formed entirely from glass, fabrication can be difficult and the resulting lamp is often quite fragile. A stronger lamp can be made by using thicker pieces of glass to form a lamp having thicker walls. However, increased glass thickness results in extra weight, is more difficult to fabricate and may attenuate some light output. Further, all forming and annealing is done with heat processing equipment, which is expensive and requires special handling of materials due to the high temperature of processing. Additionally, because such processing requires controlled temperatures during cooling to prevent defects caused by cooling, the process is quite lengthy. These lamps also typically result in operation at higher temperatures than is desirable.

Planar fluorescent lamps having sidewalls formed from metal with a serpentine channel defined by separate strips are known from U.S. Pat. Nos. 3,508,103 and 2,405,518. These lamps require fabrication and assembly of several elements to form the lamp body. Further, after such lamps are assembled and the glass cover is attached, the glass cover is typically not sealed to the tops of the metal strips defining the channels. Consequently, small gaps may remain between adjacent channels which can reduce the overall discharge length of the lamp by permitting the discharge to "shortcut" between adjacent sections of the serpentine channel, rather than following the defined serpentine channel. As is known in the art, a reduced discharge length reduces the overall efficiency of the lamp. Additionally, such an effect causes darkening of those sections of the channel through which the discharge does not travel, thereby reducing the overall uniformity of the lamp. Such a shortcut of the discharge may also cause localized heating which may in turn damage the lamp.

An alternative approach disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 4,767,965 describes a lamp formed from two parallel glass plates supported by a frame piece. The '965 patent describes a lamp that employs two cold cathode electrodes placed opposite each other. Because the plasma discharge at an optimum mercury vapor pressure conducts current as an arc, it generates light non-uniformly in such a lamp. While the cold cathode electrodes may simplify construction, the lamp described in this patent suffers from brightness variations as great as 60% across the face of the lamp. Additionally, the glass plates used in the lamp must be thick to withstand atmospheric pressure when the enclosure is evacuated.

A need remains, therefore, for a thin, planar lamp having a substantially uniform display which is easily manufacturable, provides a sealed serpentine channel, has a relatively broad range of light intensifies, is temperature tolerant, and is relatively durable. Also, such a lamp, preferably would provide illumination from out to its periphery, allowing multiple lamps to be tiled.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to principles of the present invention, a planar fluorescent lamp includes a metal lamp body having a reflective, insulative coating over an inside surface of the lamp body. A transparent cover is sealed to the lamp body to form an enclosure. The lamp body has a plurality of ridges therein, the ridges defining a serpentine channel coveting substantially the entire surface area of the interior. A pair of electrodes is positioned at distal ends of the serpentine channel, within the interior of the lamp. Mercury vapor within the enclosure generates optical energy upon excitation of the electrodes. The lamp also includes a layer of fluorescent material placed in its interior to be excited by optical energy from the mercury vapor and to generate visible light in response.

The ridges are sealed to the transparent cover such that the discharge length of the lamp is substantially the entire length of the serpentine channel. The ridges, with a reflective, insulative layer and the glass solder forming the bond between the ridges and the transparent cover, together form an insulative barrier between adjacent sections of the serpentine channel. This barrier prevents the electrical excitation of the mercury vapor from "shortcutting" between adjacent sections.

In one embodiment, the lamp includes a second transparent cover, substantially aligned with the first transparent cover and together with the first transparent cover forming a second enclosure. In this alternative embodiment, the layer of fluorescent material is within the second enclosure.

In an alternative embodiment, the lamp body includes a terminal permitting the lamp body to be used as a secondary cathode, thereby improving the uniformity of the lamp display. In this embodiment, a transparent, conductive film is placed over the transparent cover overlaying its surface. The conductive film permits the lamp cover itself to be used as one of the secondary cathodes.

In a method of fabrication according to the invention, the lamp body is formed from a single, planar sheet of metal by conventional stamping techniques. Ridges and sidewalls are formed by metal stamping. The lamp body is then coated with the reflective, insulative material using known techniques, such as electrophoresis. Such a coating preferably forms a dense, unbroken, pinhole-free, insulative surface. A glass solder bead is then formed atop sidewalls of the lamp body perimeter and along the ridges. The glass cover is then positioned in contact with the glass solder and bonded to the lamp body by reflowing the glass solder.

A slurry containing the fluorescent material is flowed through the serpentine channel and dried to form the layer of fluorescent material. Then electrodes are inserted through apertures in the lamp body which may be formed during the stamping process, or may be added subsequent to stamping. The electrodes are held in place by a glass solder to seal the enclosure. Mercury is then placed within the lamp in a noble gas environment, such as argon or krypton. The atmospheric pressure within the lamp is established by evacuating the lamp to such that mercury vapor within the lamp reaches a desired partial pressure.

For temperature specific applications, a thermal control element, such as a heater or a heat sink, is bonded to the lamp body or may be formed integrally to the lamp body. The heat sink is preferably bonded directly to the metal lamp body to create a good thermal transfer between the lamp and the heat sink. The reflective, insulative coating overlays the lower surface of the lamp body, the insulative coating on the lower surface is prevented through conventional masking techniques to provide access for such a bond.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1**A is a top plan view of an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **1**B is a side cross-sectional view of the device of FIG. **1**A.

FIG. **2**A is a top plan view of an alternative embodiment of the device.

FIG. **2**B is a side cross-sectional view of the device of FIG. **2**A.

FIG. **2**C is a top cross-sectional view showing a portion of the device of FIG. **2**A.

FIG. **3** is a representational cross section of a second alternative embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **4** is a cross-sectional view of a third alternative embodiment.

FIGS. **5**A–F are representative drawings of the various stages of the inventive method of producing a planar lamp.

FIGS. **6**A–E are cross-sectional views of sections of various alternative shapes of the serpentine channel.

FIG. **7** is a representational cross-section of a fourth alternative embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

As shown in FIGS. **1**A and **1**B, a planar fluorescent lamp **50** includes a metal lamp body **52** having sidewalls **54** around its perimeter **55**. The lamp body **52** includes planar channel sections **64** with a plurality of ridges **58** formed therebetween. The base **56** covers substantially the area defined by the sidewalls **54**. The ridges **58** extend from one of the sidewalls **54** toward the opposite sidewall **54**, ending a short distance d_r from the opposite sidewall **52**, thereby leaving a gap **62**. The upper surface of the base **56** including the ridges **58** defines a serpentine channel **60** having a nominal channel width d_c. The serpentine channel thus includes the parallel channel sections **64** and the gaps **62**. The distance d_r defining the gap **62** is preferably less than the nominal width d_c of the serpentine channel **60**.

As shown by the cross-sectional view of the embodiment of FIG. **1**A as presented in FIG. **1**B, each of the channel sections **64** includes an inner surface **66** defined by an upper surface **68** of the base **56** and inner surfaces **70**, **72** of the ridges **58**. The inner surfaces **70**, **72** and the sidewalls **54** together form channel walls for the serpentine channel **60**.

The upper surface **68** of the base **56** is coated with an insulative coating **74**. The insulative coating **74** is preferably highly reflective and is composed of materials such as porcelain enamel. Silicon dioxide films or other diamond-like coatings may be used alternatively. A fluorescent material **106** (shown and described with respect to FIGS. **3**A and **3**B below) overlays the reflective, insulative layer **74**. The fluorescent material **106** is a phosphor coating of a type known in the art.

A cover **98** is bonded to the lamp body **52** forming a contiguous seal around the perimeter **55** and at the intersections of the ridges **58** with the cover **98**. The cover **98** and the lamp body **52** together form an enclosure **100**. The cover **98** and the serpentine channel **60** also define a sealed passageway **69** having end walls **71**, **73**. Because the cover **98** is contiguously sealed along the entire length of the ridges **58**, gases within the passageway **69** may not travel across the ridges **58**. Instead, to travel from one channel section $\mathbf{64}_i$ to the next $\mathbf{64}_j$, gases must travel along the passageway **69** through the respective gap **62**.

The cover **98** is a glass having a coefficient of thermal expansion matched to that of the lamp body **52**. Other characteristics of the cover **98** will be described more thoroughly below.

A pair of electrodes **76**, **78** are positioned within the passageway **69** near the distal ends **80**, **82**, respectively, of the serpentine channel **60**. The electrodes **76**, **78** extend into the passageway **69** through respective apertures **84**, **86** in the base **56** and are held in place by an insulative bonding material **88**, **90**, such that the electrodes do not come into electrical contact with the lamp body **52**. The insulative bonding material **88**, **90** is preferably a glass solder which seals the apertures **88**, **90** and allows the entire enclosure **100** to be sealed hermetically. Held within the hermetically sealed enclosure **100** is a mercury vapor **138**, preferably in an atmosphere of argon and krypton. The electrodes **76**, **78** extend through the insulative bonding material **88**, **90** beyond the lower wall **66** to provide access for electrical connection at terminals **94**, **96**, respectively.

A secondary terminal **92** is attached to the base **56** enabling electrical connection to the base **56**. Alternately, the secondary terminal **92** may be connected to ground to help suppress electromagnetic interference or to allow the lamp body **52** to be charged. Charging the metal lamp body **52** advantageously helps to start the lamp when it is in a cold environment, thereby ensuring mercury vapor to protect the hot filaments of the electrodes **76**, **78** from getting caught up in a destructive glow discharge mode.

An alternative embodiment shown in FIGS. **2A**, **2B** and **2C** is similar to embodiment of FIGS. **1A** and **1B** except that the electrode **76** and the electrode **78** (shown in hidden lines in FIG. **2A**) are positioned below the lower wall **56** such that they are not visible from above. In this embodiment, the electrodes **76, 78** are contained within a sealed housing **102** attached below the base **56**. The housing **102** is bonded to the base **56**, forming a small enclosure **110**. To enable the electrodes **76, 78** to excite a plasma within the lamp **50** (as described below), respective plasma slots **104, 106** are formed in the base **56** (replacing the apertures **84, 86** of the embodiment described above). The plasma slots **104, 106** are small apertures which provide a passageway for gases within the lamp **50** to pass between the enclosure **100** and the small enclosure **110**. The positioning of the electrodes **76, 78** beneath the base **56** of this embodiment advantageously conceals the regions around the electrode **76, 78**, thereby concealing darkening of the plasma in those regions caused by the presence of the electrodes **76, 78**. Because the darkening effect is concealed from view, a more uniform distribution of light from the lamp **50** is provided. This permits light to be emitted across the entire lamp, enabling multiple lamps to ,be tiled in a matrix to form a large, uniform light source.

FIG. **3** presents a representational cross section of a lamp **50** according to the embodiment of FIGS. **1A** and **1B** having only four channel sections with several elements being shown in exaggerated scale to permit improved clarity of presentation. For further clarity, only four sections of the lamp **50** are shown rather than the **10** channel sections of the embodiment of FIGS. **1A–2C**. It will be understood by those skilled in the art that the number of channel sections **64** may be varied greatly without departing from the scope of the invention.

As discussed above, the reflective, insulative coating **74** preferably overlays the entire upper surface **68** of the base **56**, the sidewalls **54** and the ridges **58**. The reflective, insulative coating **74** causes the inner surface **66** of the sections of the sidewalls **54** and exposed surfaces of the gaps **62** to be highly reflective and insulative, thereby reflecting any light within the enclosure **100** and providing electrical insulation of the enclosure **100** from the lamp body **52**.

The reflective, insulative layer **74** is preferably a very thin, uniform, pinhole-free coating. Such thin uniform coatings may be achieved through electrocoating techniques such as electrophoresis, though other coating techniques such as chemical vapor deposition, dipping, and spray coating are also within the scope of the invention. As discussed below, the uniformity and pinhole-free structure achieved with such techniques can be improved by reflowing the layer **74** after coating. It has been determined that thin, uniform coatings are less likely than relatively thicker and/or non-uniform coatings to be damaged through flexure of the lamp body **52** which may occur through a variety of operational conditions. For example, thermal cycling of the lamp **50** may cause an expansion or contraction of the lamp body **52** due to the thermal coefficient of expansion of the metal forming the lamp body **52** or due to thermal expansion of the cover **98** which stresses the sidewalls **54**. Also, in some applications, the lamp **50** may be subjected to vibration or impact causing some deformation of the lamp body **52**. A uniform, pinhole-free coating is further advantageous, as pinholes or other gaps in the insulative layer **74** can disadvantageously provide a shortcut for the plasma arc by providing a path to the metal lamp body **52**.

The fluorescent material **106** covers the reflective, insulative layer **74** throughout the enclosure **100**. As shown, the fluorescent material **106** may also coat the lower surface of the cover **98**. Where the fluorescent material coats the layer surface of the cover **98**, it may be patterned according to a desired pattern. Such a patterned coating allows the light to be emitted in a specific pattern from the lamp. The cover **98** is preferably bonded to the lamp body using a clear glass solder bead **108** which preferably forms the contiguous seal **101** around the entire circumference of the lamp body and also seals the tops of the ridges **58** to the cover **98**.

As shown in FIG. **3**, the fluorescent material **106** does not pass underneath the glass solder bead **108**. This is advantageous because it helps to prevent shortcutting of electrical energy across the ridges **58**. That is, if a continuous layer of the fluorescent material **106** is permitted to form under the glass solder bead **108**, it may provide a slightly conductive path or "shortcut" between adjacent sections over the intervening ridge **58**. The effective discharge length between the electrodes **76, 78** would thereby be reduced. As is known in the art, the path length of electrical energy between electrodes strongly influences efficiency. By reducing the effective discharge length, shortcutting thus reduces the overall efficiency of the lamp **50** as is known in the art. Moreover, because some of the electrical energy will not travel along the entire length of the channel sections **64**, portions of channel sections **64** adjacent the shortcut will appear darker, reducing the uniformity of light produced by the lamp **50**. This problem is prevented in the present invention by the glass cover **98**, the glass solder bead **108** and the ceramic glass coating **78** which together form an insulative barrier between adjacent sections **64**. This barrier advantageously reduces the above-described problem of shortcutting, improving uniformity and efficiency of the lamp **50**.

The cover **98** is transparent to visible light to maximize the light energy emitted from the lamp **50**. In the embodiment of FIG. **3**, the cover **98** preferably reflects ultraviolet light back into the enclosure **100** to increase the efficiency of the lamp **50** as described below. To improve the transmissivity of the cover in the visible range and to improve its reflectivity in the ultraviolet range, the cover **98** includes an optically transparent layer **112** and a dichroic coating **114**. The optically transparent layer **112** is typically of a thin film glass material chosen to transmit light in the visible range while absorbing or reflecting light in the ultraviolet range. The dichroic coating **114** may be of a commercially available material selected to transmit light at the desired output wavelength of the lamp (typically, visible light) while reflecting light at other wavelengths (e.g., ultraviolet) back into the enclosure **100**. The dichroic coating **114** may be applied using a number of known methods. As discussed below, the optically transparent layer **112** and dichroic coating **114** may be chosen with different optical properties for specific applications, such as infrared light generation. Additionally, while the coating is described as a dichroic coating **114**, other wavelength selective overlays such as known semiconductor-based coatings may be used alternatively.

A thermal control element **115** is bonded to the lower surface of the lamp body **52** in a known manner such as a thermally conductive ceramic metal (cermet) solder or epoxy. The thermal control element **115** may be a heat sink to prevent overheating of the lamp, or may be a heating element to permit additional heat to be added. A heat sink for the thermal control element **115** is desirable in high output, continuous operation environments where the temperature of the lamp **50** may become undesirably high. A heating element for the thermal control elements **115** may be particularly advantageous for cold environment operation to warm the lamp **50**, including the electrodes **76**, **78**, to reduce problems associated with cold-starting fluorescent lamps. Alternatively, both a heat sink and a heating element may be used together to provide a broader range of temperature control than that provided by a single thermal control element. Where a heat sink is desired it may be formed integral to the lamp body during the stamping process as a fin or multiple fins forced in the metal lamp body, as described below. Such finned structures for heat dissipation are well known. Where a heater is used, it can be printed on the backside of the lamp body **52** and be patterned into a sinuous resistive network, mirroring the serpentine channel design. The conductor film works effectively when applied by thick film by way of a solid state bond, electrically insulated from the metal substrate by insulative film **115A**.

FIG. 4 presents an alternative embodiment that advantageously permits the separation of the phosphor layer from the enclosure **100**. This embodiment is structured similarly to the previous embodiments, except as discussed hereinafter. In this second alternative embodiment, the cover **98** is positioned below the top of the sidewalls **54** and held in place by a solder glass bead **140** which forms a rigid bond between the cover **98** and the sidewall **54**. A second cover **98A** is positioned above and substantially parallel to the cover **98**. The second cover **98A** is held in place by a second solder glass bead **140A** which forms a rigid bond between the sidewalls **54** and the second cover **98A**. A second enclosure **100A** is thus formed by the cover **98**, the second cover **98A** and a portion **54A** of the sidewalls **54**.

In this embodiment, the fluorescent material **106A** is within the second enclosure **100A** and is thus held separate from the mercury vapor **138** in the enclosure **100** by the cover **98**.

The separation of the fluorescent material **106A** (which typically contains phosphor) from the mercury vapor **138** advantageously reduces problems associated with the presence of phosphor within the enclosure **100**. For example, because no phosphor is within the enclosure **100**, the known problem of phosphor migration is eliminated. That is, no phosphor ions can migrate through the glass solder bead **108** to provide conduction between adjacent channels **64**. This reduces the effects of shortcutting as described above.

Additionally, the fluorescent material **106A** does not coat the lower surface of the cover **98**. The phosphor will thus not affect the optical properties of the first cover **98**. This, in ram, permits the selection of desired optical properties for the cover **98** and the second cover **98A**. In this embodiment, the cover **98** is preferably chosen to be a glass which is highly transmissive in the ultraviolet range and highly reflective in the visible range. This permits ultraviolet energy produced within the enclosure **100** to pass efficiently into the second enclosure **100A** where it can strike the fluorescent material **106A**. However, visible light emitted downwardly by the fluorescent material **106A** strikes the cover **98** and is reflected upwardly to be emitted by the lamp **50**.

The second cover **98A** is preferably chosen to be of a material that is transmissive at the desired output wavelength (e.g., visible light) of the lamp **50** and highly reflective at ultraviolet wavelengths. This permits light generated when the fluorescent material **106A** is struck by ultraviolet light to be emitted from the lamp, while ultraviolet light is reflected back into the enclosure **100** where it is reflected by the reflective, insulative coating **74**, back toward the fluorescent material **106A** to generate additional fluorescent light.

The lamp **50** is produced according to the following method. A single, planar sheet of metal **120** is provided. As shown in FIGS. 5A–F, the lamp body **52** is produced from the single sheet of metal **120** using known metal stamping and coating techniques. The sheet of metal **120** is initially positioned between a pair of complementary die **122**, **124** having matched protrusions **126** and depressions **128**. Each of the outermost protrusions **126** has a corresponding cylindrical punch **130** which mates to a respective hole **132** in the lower die **124**. When the upper die **122** is pressed to the lower die **124**, the metal **120** is shaped to form the lamp body **52** having apertures **84**, **86** formed by the punches $\mathbf{130}_m$, $\mathbf{130}_n$ as shown in FIG. 5B. Excess metal may be eliminated or prevented using known techniques such as casting, or laser fabricating, or may be eliminated by forming cutting edges on the die **122**, **124**, as is known.

A layer **74** is then formed over the lamp body **52** by coating, as shown in FIG. 5C, with the reflective, insulative coating of a known material such as a reflective porcelain enamel, a silicon dioxide film or another diamond-like coating. The layer **74** is applied with an appropriate dense coating technique, such as electrophoresis, chemical vapor deposition, dipping or spray coating. If the technique used results in the layer **74** extending to the lower surface **134** of the base **56**, the excess coating is removed at selected locations using mechanical, chemical or optical (laser) techniques to provide access for connection of the third electrode **92** and/or the thermal control element **115** to the base **56**. After the reflective layer **74** is applied and buffed to remove undesired material, the reflective, insulative layer **74** is reflowed to remove defects and form an unbroken, pinhole-free surface. To reflow the deposited layer **74**, the reflective, insulative coating is heated to approximately its melting temperature and cooled slowly and controllably. For example, the lamp may be cooled from a typical reflow temperature of about 780° C. for porcelain enamel to room temperature over a period of about four hours using a commercially available conveyorized furnace. This eliminates crystalline deformations formed during the coating process, thereby improving the homogeneity and uniformity of the insulative layer **74**. The reflow process increases the density of the glass layer **74**, providing the advantage that it has fewer pinholes or other discontinuities that could otherwise provide a short-circuit pathway to the metal body **52**. This results in being able to construct a more reliable, error-free lamp using a thinner layer **74** than would be possible with the same glass, but without the reflow technique. This technique is thus particularly advantageous to provide a dense, uniform, yet relatively thin glass layer **74** for use as an insulative barrier in a flat fluorescent lamp.

As shown in FIG. 5D, a glass solder bead **108** is deposited along the top of the already-coated sidewall **54** and atop the already-coated ridges **58**. The glass solder bead is formed using a glass having a lower melting point than the material of the reflective insulative coatings. The cover **98** is then positioned over the lamp body **56**, in contact with the glass solder bead **108**. The glass solder bead **108** is then melted to form a continuous bond between the cover **98** and the reflective, insulative coating **74** along the top of the sidewalls **54** and the ridges **58**. Because the glass solder bead **108** has a lower melting temperature than the reflective insulative layer **74**, this heating of the glass solder bead to form the bond advantageously does not affect the reflective insulative layer. The lamp body with the cover bonded thereto forms an enclosure **100** having openings only at the apertures **84**, **86**.

As shown in FIG. 5E, the inner surfaces of the enclosure **100** are coated with the fluorescent material **106** by drawing a phosphor-containing slurry through the enclosure **100** along the passageway **69** from one aperture **86** to the other aperture **84** using standard suction techniques or by injecting the slurry in one aperture **86** and forcing it through the enclosure **100** along the passageway **69** to the other aperture **84**. In another alternative, the interior of the lamp body **52** is coated before the cover is attached and a serpentine pattern of fluorescent material **106** is formed on the cover **98** using known printing techniques. The lamp **50** is then heated to deposit the fluorescent material **106** throughout the enclosure **100**. As is known, during the heating of the slurry, the reflective, insulative coating **74** is heated to a temperature where it softens and becomes sticky, but below a temperature where glass may cause degradation of the phosphor.

As shown in FIG. 5F, the thermal control element **115** is attached to the lower surface **134** of the base **56** in a known manner. The electrodes **76**, **78** are then inserted in the apertures **84**, **86** and bonded in place using an insulative material, such as a glass solder. The electrode **92** is then electrically connected to the lamp body, by direct attachment to the lamp body **52**. The electrode **92** is held in place and the electrical connection is achieved through a known technique such as soldering, binding by pin and socket or by card edge connection.

Alternatively, additional heat dissipation capability can be formed integral to the lamp body **52** by forming fins **57** projecting outwardly from the lamp body **52**, as shown in FIG. **6**A. Such fins are known to provide an increased surface area to permit circulating air to dissipate heat more efficiently. As is known in the art, an operative fluorescent lamp requires a source material, typically mercury vapor, within the enclosure **100**. In the preferred embodiment, mercury vapor **138** is inserted in the enclosure **10** through a small hole **140** (shown in FIGS. **1**A and **2**A). The aperture is then sealed using known techniques, such as a glass solder. To reduce the detrimental effects which might occur if oxygen is present within the enclosure **100**, the mercury vapor is inserted through the hole **140** in the presence of a noble gas, such as argon, under a predetermined pressure and the lamp **50** is sealed before it is returned to the atmosphere. Typically, the predetermined pressure established within the enclosure **100** is below atmospheric pressure. The difference in pressure between the interior of the lamp **50** and the surrounding atmosphere places the lamp body **52** under a slight tension which has been determined to provide desirable relief from environmental effects, such as temperature increases.

In an alternative to the above-described method, the steps of coating the enclosure **100** with the phosphor containing slurry and baking out of the slurry are performed prior to the addition of the glass solder bead **108** and attachment of the cover **98**. In this alternative method, the slurry is applied directly to the walls of the serpentine channel **60** and baked out, rather than using a vacuum or injection technique. The glass solder bead **108** is then applied to the perimeter of the lamp body **52** and the tops **110** of the ridges **58**.

This alternative method is advantageous in that it prevents solid state migration of phosphor ions from the fluorescent material into the glass solder as the lamp **50** is heated during the baking out of the slurry. A phosphor-free glass is desirable because phosphor within the solder glass **108** may provide a conductive path between adjacent channel **64** effectively reducing the overall length of the serpentine channel by providing a shortcut in a similar manner to that described above, thereby reducing the efficiency of the lamp **50**. Such solid state migration detrimentally creates a localized graying effect due to the presence of the slightly conductive path between adjacent panels.

In a second alternative embodiment of the inventive method, a further layer of glass containing lead may be deposited over the interior walls of the enclosure **100** prior to the attachment of the cover **98** and insertion of the slurry. The lead containing glass may be deposited in a known manner such as common deposition techniques. Such glasses containing lead are known to reduce the problem of migration of ions, such as phosphor ions from the fluorescent material, through the glasses in the lamp. In addition to preventing solid state migration of phosphor ions as described above, the lead containing glass is also useful to limit solid state migration through the glass of sodium and potassium ions which are inherent in many glasses.

The operation of the inventive device will now be described with reference to FIGS. **1**A and **1**B. In operation, the mercury gas **138** within the enclosure **100** is excited along the length of the passageway **69** by the electrodes **76**, **78** according to known principles of fluorescent lamps. This major discharge arc is controlled between the electrodes **76**, **78** for low to full brightness (+15K foot Lamberts). Other times, as in backlighting of avionic instruments during night flying, the secondary electrodes formed by the transparent conductive layer **14** and the lamp body **52** may be used independently. In order to have a large dynamic range of light, the lamp must be able to be dimmed below 1 foot Lambert and still hold a uniform discharge. This is virtually impossible utilizing the major are electrodes **76**, **78** only. Conversely, a combination of the electrodes **76**, **78** and the secondary electrodes can be used for controlled dimming operations up to approximately 50 fL. This effectively produces a diffused plasma throughout the serpentine channel even at lower current levels used below approximately **500** fL. The mercury gas emits light when excited, primarily in the ultraviolet range, although some visible light energy is also produced. As is known in the art, the light energy from the mercury plasma radiates in all directions from approximately the center of the passageway **69** as viewed in cross-section. The radiated light energy from the mercury strikes the fluorescent material **106** which, in response, emits visible light. The visible light is then emitted through the transparent cover **98** toward an observer.

Providing a highly reflective inner surface **66** of the serpentine channel **60** due to the reflective, insulative layer **74** advantageously improves the efficiency of the conversion of ultraviolet light to visible light. Some of the impinging ultraviolet light energy from the excited mercury vapor is not convened by the fluorescent material **106** to visible light, because the process of conversion is not 100% efficient. In the inventive lamp **50**, light emitted from the mercury gas and not convened to visible light is reflected back into the enclosure by the reflective layer **74** where the light may once again strike the fluorescent material **106**, rather than being lost through absorption in the lamp body **52**. Thus, some of the unconverted light emitted from the mercury gas is reflected to generate additional visible light, thereby improving the overall efficiency of the lamp **50**.

Because the base **56** of the lamp **50** is formed using metal stamping techniques, the inner surface **66** of the serpentine channel **60** have almost any cross-sectional shape by machining the appropriate complementary die **122**, **124**.

Shown in cross-section in FIGS. **6**A–E are alternative cross-sectional views of sections **64** of the serpentine channel **60**, including a finned section, a section formed from flat planes, an arcuate section, a shallow parabolic section and a steep parabolic section, respectively. As discussed above, the tinned section of FIG. **6**D improves heat dissipation. The flat planar cross-section of FIG. **6**B is easily fabricated and provides a substantially planar base, to which the thermal control element **115** may be bonded easily. The shallow parabolic section of FIG. **6**D, as is known, reflects light generated near the focal point of the parabola and directs it outwardly toward an observer. The steeper parabolic shape of FIG. **6**E may be used to focus ultraviolet light energy on specific regions containing fluorescent material (e.g., the lower surface of the cover **98**). This increases the probability that ultraviolet light within the passageway **69** which strikes the inner surface **66** and is reflected rather than converted to visible light will re-strike the fluorescent material and generate light. The arcuate section of FIG. **6**C is also relatively easily fabricated and, because it will not typically have a specific focal point, as is known, can provide a smeared, more even light distribution than the parabolic sections of FIGS. **6**D and **6**E. While the shapes shown in FIGS. **6**A–**6**E are advantageous in certain instances, other shapes which direct light toward an observer may be chosen without departing from scope of the invention.

The operation of the lamp **50** as described above presumes hot cathode operation. That is, when the mercury vapor is excited to a plasma arc state, the lamp **50** generates a relatively high level of light energy. To do so, however, the electrodes **76**, **78** must be heated to a temperature in the range of 1000° C. While this type of operation is useful for many applications, it is often desirable to operate lamps such that they produce a lower light level. For example, such low level operation may be particularly useful for applications such as nighttime illumination of instruments or other low light applications.

In hot cathode operation as described above, it is very difficult and inefficient to operate the lamp **50** at low light levels. This occurs in part because sufficient energy must be input to the electrodes **76**, **78** to heat them to the 1000° C. range. In low light operation, this requires the addition of a heating element to raise the temperature of the electrodes **76**, **78**. Further, hot cathode operation of fluorescent lamps at low light levels is known to cause degradation of the electrodes over time through sputtering away of the electrode material.

A known alternative to hot cathode operation of fluorescent lamps is cold cathode operation. In cold cathode operation, a third electrode having a large surface area is employed. The third electrode operates at a temperature around 150° C. and provides electrons by field emission, also called secondary electron emission. Cold cathode operation is advantageous because light energy at low light levels is known to be produced more efficiently by cold cathode operation. This improved efficiency is achieved in part because cold cathode operation generally requires no heater to operate at low light levels. For more detailed description of hot and cold cathode operation. See Miller, H. A., "Cold Cathode Fluorescent Lighting," *Chemical Publishing*, 1979.

The present invention can generate light through cold cathode operation by the use of the cold cathode electrodes **119**, **121** as shown in FIGS. **1**A and **1**B. In combination, hot cathode and cold cathode capabilities provide high light intensity capability along with high dimmability, as described in U.S. patent application Ser. No. 07/816,034. The lamp **50** thus becomes a source of extremely uniform, low intensity light, useful in low light situations without degrading the major are electrodes **76**, **78** and a source of high intensity light useful in high ambient light environments.

Further improvement in the operation of the lamp is achievable through control of electric fields within the lamp by controlling the voltage applied to the secondary terminal **92**. The secondary terminal **92** allows the entire lamp body **52** to be referenced to a known potential or driven by a second input source, effectively converting the lamp body **52** to a third electrode or ground reference. In the preferred embodiment, the lamp body **52** operates using field emission effect. This is the same phenomenon applied in cold cathode operation. See Miller, H. A., "Cold Cathode Fluorescent Lighting," *Chemical Publishing*, 1979. However, the present invention contemplates that this effect may be used independently of, or in conjunction with, typical cold cathodes. Therefore, to distinguish the effect produced by the use of a portion of the lamp body **52** (or, as described hereinafter, a portion of the lamp cover **98**) as an electrode from typical cold cathode operation; the effect will be referred to herein as a secondary electrode effect. Because the entire lamp body **52** is used as a secondary electrode, electrons may be emitted throughout the lamp and light may thus be produced at any point along the upper surface **67** of the base **56** or along the sidewalls **54**. Thus, the secondary electrode effect, when combined with hot cathode operation, produces light relatively uniformly throughout the enclosure **100**.

The secondary electrode effect also permits the electric field intensity to be controlled throughout the lamp **50**. The electric field caused by the secondary electrode can be used to spread the mercury vapor discharge more evenly in the lamp **50**, improving uniformity of light produced by the lamp **50**.

In an alternative arrangement employing the secondary electrode effect, a layer of a transparent conductive coating **114**A such as indium tin oxide is formed beneath the dichroic coating **114**. Such materials are known in the art. As shown in FIG. **7**, the transparent conductive coating **114**A preferably covers a central portion of the lower surface of the lamp cover, and follows the serpentine path.

In this alternative embodiment, the transparent conductive coating **114**A is electrically connected to the lamp body **52** in a known manner, such as by attachment of a conductive lead between the transparent conductive coating **114**A and the lamp body **52**. This embodiment is particularly advantageous because it enables the secondary electrode effect to be applied in almost any direction via the plasma discharge through the serpentine channel **60** from any or all the lower surface **66** of the base **56**, the sidewall **54**, and the lower surface of the lamp cover **98**. An insulative coating **114**B over the transparent conductive coating **114**A advantageously prevents the transparent conductive coating **114**A from providing a relatively low impedance path directly between the electrodes **76**, **78** as compared to the path through the light producing gas. The insulative dichroic coating **114**B also prevents the indium fin oxide from being sputtered away. The transparent conductive coating **114**A is patterned into a serpentine, matching the metal stamped serpentine and provides improved control of the electric field and temperature within the chamber. If an AC field is applied between transparent conductive coating **114**A and the lamp body **52**, it produces a secondary plasma discharge, which in turn intensifies the primary arc discharge. While the conductive transparent coating **114**A is shown as coveting substantially the entire serpentine channel, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that other configurations, such as linear strips of conductive transparent coating **114**A along each of the sections **64**, are also within the scope of the invention. Choosing different structures for the transparent conductive coating advantageously allows electric fields generated by the secondary electrodes to be modified to thereby modify the shape of the plasma discharge.

Cold cathode operation may be used in conjunction with hot cathode operation, to generate a uniform low light level in addition to the less uniform higher light level produced through hot cathode only operation. The cold cathode effect helps to create a more uniform over lighting effect for the lamp by providing some light in those regions, such as at corners, where hot cathode operation is known to leave "dark" regions. This permits the illumination to be permitted across the entire lamp allowing lamps to be positioned side-by-side in a tiled matrix to produce light uniformly over a large area.

The use of secondary electrodes in conjunction with hot cathode operations advantageously allows control of the electromagnetic fields through which the plasma arc passes. For example, the transparent conductive coating **114**A may be connected to one terminal of a power source with the lamp body connected to a second terminal of the power source. If the power source is separate from the input to the electrodes **76**, **78**, such as a separate AC power supply, the electric fields transverse to the direction of the plasma arc and can be generated and controlled.

Because the electromagnetic fields in the region of the plasma arc can affect the distribution of light generated by the plasma discharge, the distribution of light in the lamp **50** can be altered by applying power to the secondary electrodes. This effect is particularly advantageous at the gaps **62** between adjacent channel sections **64** where the effect permits the plasma discharge to be altered to reduce uniformity caused by the turn.

As is known, the electric field between electrodes is affected significantly by the relative position and shape of the electrodes. Thus, the effect of the transparent conductive coating **114**A may be adjusted by selection of appropriate structures for the transparent conductive coating **114**A, such as narrow linear strips.

While the above embodiments presume that the lamp **50** is to be used for visible light creation, through the selection of appropriate materials the lamp **50** may also be used for generation of light in the ultraviolet or infrared regions according to known techniques. For example, if the dichroic coating **114** is chosen to permit the passage of ultraviolet light while reflecting visible and infrared light back into the enclosure **100**, the lamp may be used as an ultraviolet light source. Once again, selection of the proper materials for the reflective insulation coating **74** and for the cover **98**. Such lamps might be useful in medical and other applications where the ultraviolet light provides an inhibitive effect upon the growth of pathogens.

Similarly, if the fluorescent coating is chosen to emit light in the infrared range and dichroic coating **114** is selected to permit emission of only the infrared light generated by the fluorescent coating, and to reflect ultraviolet and visible light back into the enclosure, the fluorescent lamp may be used as an infrared light source. The selectivity and efficiency of such infrared operation may be improved further by selecting the reflective, insulative coating **74** to have a wavelength selective reflectivity and by selecting a glass for the cover **98** that absorbs light in the visible and ultraviolet ranges. Infrared lights of this type are particularly useful in certain nighttime applications, such as night vision technology.

In a similar fashion, the coating **114** may be chosen such that the lamp **50** can be made to produce light selectively in a given range of visible wavelengths. For example, the lamp may be used to produce solely red or blue light by providing a coating **114** that selectively passes only red or blue light of that specific phosphor wavelength.

The lamp is designed to have a maximum brightness greater than 15K fL, with a dynamic range down to less than 1 fL or a dimming ratio of 15000:1. This is only possible by maintaining a uniform and steady plasma discharge with an additional electromagnetic field suppressed against the major arc emissions. This additional electromagnetic field is supplied by the planar electrodes.

The invention has been described and illustrated with respect to various alternative embodiments. Variations of the alternative embodiments may be made within the scope of the invention. For example, while the preferred embodiment of the invention is generally rectangular, other shapes, such as circular cross-sections were known shapes for planar fluorescent lamps, and may be used without departing from the scope of the invention.

This description enables those skilled in the art to combine one or more of the features of one embodiment with other embodiments. For example, the embodiment including two enclosures may be utilized with the transparent conductive film to create a dual enclosure lamp with a cold cathode along the upper and lower surface of the first lamp cover.

Other features of the various embodiments could also be combined, as desired, without including all of the features of any one embodiment. Such a lamp would still fall within the scope of this invention. Additionally, equivalent structure may be substituted for the structure described herein to perform the same function in substantially the same way and fall within the scope of the present invention, the invention being described by the claims appended hereto and not restricted to the embodiments shown herein.

I claim:

1. A method of producing a planar fluorescent lamp, comprising the steps of:

providing a metallic body material;

stamping said metallic body material into a stamped body having a perimeter wall portion and a plurality of ridges defining a channel having a first end and a second end;

coating said perimeter wall portions and said plurality of ridges with an insulative material;

forming a solder glass bead atop each of said ridges and atop said perimeter wall;

bonding a transparent cover to stamped body, thereby forming an enclosure;

coating said interior of the lamp body with a fluorescent material;

inserting within said enclosure a material responsive to emit light energy in response to electrical stimulation within said enclosure;

fixedly positioning a pair of electrodes with respect to said lamp body such that said electrodes extend through respective apertures in said lamp body into the enclosure; and

sealing said enclosure to form a hermetically sealed enclosure.

2. The method of claim **1** wherein the step of coating the interior with an insulative coating comprises the steps of:

coating said interior with a ceramic glass with an electrophoresis technique; and

reflowing said ceramic glass to form a substantially uniform insulative coating.

3. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of:

coating said interior with a second coating, said second coating including a material of sufficient density to inhibit migration of ions through said insulative coating and said solder glass bead.

4. The method of claim **1** wherein the step of coating the interior with a fluorescent material comprises:

after bonding said cover to said lamp body, flowing a slurry containing said fluorescent material through the channel; .and

heating the lamp body to form a coating from the fluorescent material throughout the channel.

5. The method of claim **1** wherein the step of fixedly positioning the pair of electrodes comprises the steps of:

inserting each of said electrodes through a respective aperture in said lamp body in a position relative to said lamp body, such that said electrodes remain electrically isolated from said lamp body; and

bonding, with a glass solder, the electrodes in said position.

6. The method of claim **1** wherein the step of placing said material responsive to produce light energy in response to electrical stimulation comprises the steps of:

evacuating the enclosure through a plurality of pumping holes; and

inserting mercury into said enclosure in a noble gas environment at a predetermined pressure.

7. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of bonding a terminal in electrical contact with said lamp body.

8. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of bonding a thermal control element in thermal contact with said lamp body.

9. The method of claim **8** wherein said thermal control element is a heating element.

10. A method of producing a planar fluorescent lamp comprising the steps of:

providing a metallic body material;

forming said body material into a formed body having a perimeter wall and a plurality of ridges therein, said ridges defining a channel having a first end and a second end;

coating substantially all of the interior of said stamped body with an insulative material;

placing a solder glass bead atop each of said ridges and atop the perimeter of the lamp body;

bonding a transparent first cover to said stamped body by heating the solder, such that said stamped body and said first cover form a first enclosure;

placing a material responsive to emit light energy in response to an electrical field within said first enclosure;

bonding a second cover in a fixed position overlaying said first cover with a gap between said first cover and said second cover, such that said first cover and said second cover form at least two walls of a second enclosure;

placing a fluorescent material within said second enclosure;

fixedly attaching a pair of electrodes to said stamped body such that the electrodes extend into the first enclosure;

sealing said first enclosure to form a hermetically sealed enclosure; and

sealing the second enclosure.

11. The method of claim **10** wherein the step of coating the interior with an insulative coating comprises the steps of:

coating the interior with a ceramic glass using electrophoresis; and

reflowing the ceramic glass to form a substantially uniform insulative coating.

12. The method of claim **10** wherein the step of fixedly positioning the pair of electrodes comprises the steps of:

inserting the electrodes through respective apertures in the lamp body in a position such that the electrodes do not come into electrical contact with the lamp body; and

soldering, with a glass solder, the electrodes in said position.

13., The method of claim **10** wherein the step of placing a material responsive to emit light energy in said first enclosure comprises:

inserting mercury into the first enclosure; and

establishing a predetermined pressure within the first enclosure.

14. The method of claim **10**, further comprising the step of bonding a heat sink in thermal contact with the lamp body.

15. The method of claim **10**, further comprising the step of coating said lamp cover with an optical coating said optical coating being selected to selectively reflect ultraviolet light.

16. The method of claim **10**, further comprising bonding an electrical terminal to said lamp body in electrical isolation from the lamp body.

17. The method of claim **16**, further comprising the steps of:

coating a surface of said lamp cover with an electrically conductive transparent layer;

overlaying said electrically conductive transparent layer with an insulative layer; and

electrically connecting said electrically conductive transparent coating to said terminal.

18. A method of producing a planar fluorescent lamp comprising the steps of:

providing a metallic body material;

forming said metallic body material into a lamp body having a perimeter wall portion and a plurality of ridges defining a channel having a first end and a second end;

coating said perimeter wall portions and said plurality of ridges with an insulative material;

placing a solder glass bead atop said ridges and atop said perimeter;

bonding a transparent cover to said lamp body by positioning said lamp cover over said lamp body and heating said solder glass bead to form a bond, thereby forming a first enclosure;

placing a fluorescent material within the first enclosure;

inserting within said first enclosure a material responsive to produce light energy in response to electrical stimulation;

bonding a housing to said exterior of said lamp body to form a second enclosure;

forming a plasma slot through said lamp body to form a passageway between said first enclosure and said second enclosure; and

fixedly positioning an electrode with respect to said housing such that said electrode extends into said second enclosure.

19. The method of claim **18**, further comprising the steps of:

coating the lamp cover with a conductive transparent coating;

attaching a terminal to said lamp body; and

electrically connecting said transparent conductive coating to said terminal.

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